



I Don't Like the Looks of That Large Black Spot

by Lt. Erik Ostrom

We launched on time on a standard pilot trainer, leaving behind the peaceful confines of beautiful Rota, Spain. I was a new IP with 100 hours of the coveted "T" time in the logbook. After an uneventful hour in our high area, where we practiced maneuvers and simulated malfunctions, we set course for an outlying Air Force base.

Flying VFR on a CAVU day, we requested an IFR pick-up from Spanish ATC to facilitate some approach training. Since ATC couldn't comply with our request, I decided to execute the overhead break. You jet guys may not think much of it, but those of us lucky enough to fly the venerable P-3 enjoy this 250-knot, 2.5G maneuver. With the limited visibility in the P-3, it is exciting to see the horizon cutting across the windscreen at 60 degrees angle of bank. The sight of a lumbering P-3 executing this maneuver is actually impressive when viewed from the ground.

The Spanish controller switched us up to tower freq, and we reported the initial for the break. Coming in, we noticed a Spanish helo preparing for takeoff at the approach end, and another, older model twin-engine awaiting its turn at the hold short. We hit the numbers and rolled into 60 degrees,

holding back ever so slightly on the yoke to maintain our altitude as the speed bled off. As we reached the abeam position, I passed the standard gear report to the tower, and the Spanish controller promptly cleared us for the option. Turning final, I made sure the checklist was complete and repeated the approach speeds to the PAC. The FE said he thought he saw a large black spot on the runway. We elected to continue the approach, planning to wave off at 500 feet if we couldn't figure out what it was. Passing through our self-imposed DH, the spot was still indiscernible. Feeling uncomfortable and keeping with our interim plan, I directed the PAC to wave off and slide us inside of the runway, away from any traffic that might be coming our way.

As we neared the threshold, climbing through 700 feet, everything came into view. There, hovering some 20 feet above the approach numbers, was that same Spanish helo! Apparently, we had been cleared for the option, with traffic still on the runway. How could this have happened? I requested downwind as we climbed to pattern altitude and was greeted by the local USAF controller. He quickly requested a clarification of what had just transpired. I filled him in and asked



him to prepare a clearance for us to RTB. It would seem that today was not a good day to fly there.

Most naval aviators get their flight time in the States or around the boat. The P-3 community, however, spends entire tours forward-deployed, operating almost exclusively outside CONUS. We quickly learn to decipher comms that are in broken English and to handle situations where your request just doesn't translate to the native tongue of the host-nation controllers. A common problem is that local civil and military aircraft often communicate on discreet frequencies or in their own language, leaving the rest of us to rely solely on the basic VFR scan to keep our SA at its highest. Furthermore, at bases with U.S. components, there are often two controllers, one for U.S. traffic, and the other handling host nation flights.

Our incident wasn't the first, nor will it be the last. The local controller was apparently overwhelmed by the amount of traffic at this sleepy little base. We would normally have been controlled by USAF personnel, but we weren't handed off, resulting in a possible language barrier and a potential mishap.

One of the challenges of flying (except for the helo bubbas) is that you can't pull over and think about what to do next. We constantly update our mental pictures and sometimes operate with temporary plans, while we revise the master plan.

Always keep your head out of the cockpit and have a plan ready. The guy in the tower isn't going to die if you hit someone or the ground. 🛩️

Lt. Ostrom is an instructor pilot with VQ-2.